

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/111737>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

Should We Control World Population?, Diana Coole (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 140 pp., \$45 cloth, \$12.95 paper, \$10.99 eBook.

As Diana Coole notes in the opening paragraphs of *Should We Control World Population?*, influencing the reproductive behavior of individuals is not only complicated, it is profoundly controversial. Notorious examples such as China's one-child policy and India's compulsory sterilizations in the 1970s often spring to mind when one mentions "population control." But there are, of course, many other ways to influence demographics, such as through political incentives and disincentives, and economic nudging forces. This interesting and accessible book seeks to answer a seemingly straightforward question: Can population control be empirically and morally justified?

Coole neatly divides this core question into three strands. The first chapter addresses the empirical concern: Are there valid environmental, economic, and humanitarian reasons to limit the size of the world's population? On this, the author does not give a clear answer. Rather, she acknowledges the differing opinions and argues that the more important disagreement is whether or not population control should be considered coercive and/or morally reprehensible. The remainder of the book therefore examines the means by which we might achieve population control: Is government interference with private reproductive behavior illegitimate (chapter two) and, if not, what types of demographic policies are acceptable (chapter three)?

The second chapter begins by framing the question in the context of John Stuart Mill's harm principle, which roughly states that governments may only restrict someone's liberty if doing so would prevent harm to others. Coole argues that although sexuality is almost exclusively self-regarding, procreation is not. Without wading too far into the "children as public goods" debate, she accepts that children are at least not *only* private goods

as they may also, at times, be public burdens or resources. As with any kind of other-regarding action, reproductive liberty therefore becomes (at least *prima facie*) subject to public intervention. Coole sees Mill's liberalism as allowing direct and indirect interventions in reproduction so long as a convincing case can be made for their collective benefits and as long as other self-regarding liberties are protected. She favors this type of "circumscribed consequentialism" because it allows for contextual flexibility and maintains liberal constraints on government interference such that the bias is toward reproductive liberty unless significant harm to others is demonstrated.

More specifically, Coole distinguishes between three categories of reproductive rights—basic, socio-economic, and moral—and argues that only one, basic human rights, are immune from population controls on consequentialist grounds. By basic human rights, she means "all people's right not to be sexually violated or subjected to gross bodily harm" (p. 79), including abuses arising from coercive population policies (for example, compulsory sterilization). She holds that these basic rights are not subject to consequentialist reasoning, but even if they were, their abuse would sufficiently compromise an individual's security so as to outweigh any subsequent aggregated happiness.

Although I think Coole is right in her first claim that basic human rights ought not be subject to consequentialist reasoning, the second claim is more dubious and is taken for granted rather than argued. Here she could have engaged with the substantial consequentialist literature that considers just this sort of question. Indeed, this is a recurring problem, as Coole occasionally fails to fully argue her points, instead relying on the reader to share her intuitions.

The same issue arises, for example, when she argues why the third category of reproductive rights may be justifiably limited. Here she discusses what she calls "moral rights of reproduction"—the right to decide whether, when, and how many children to have. She

presents Sarah Conly's and Elizabeth Cripps's arguments that from a climate change and emissions reduction perspective a single act of reproduction may be considered self-regarding, but any more becomes other-regarding and therefore subject to consequentialist considerations and potential controls. However, she does not make clear why we ought to find Conly's or Cripps's arguments compelling, and she does not present any of the many potential objections to their views. Indeed, it is not even entirely clear until the end of the chapter that she actually agrees with them. As a result, Coole's conclusions are less persuasive than they might be, and her overall position that we must "safeguard basic rights (and self-regarding acts) while recognizing other rights are dependent on circumstances and therefore as amenable to political interventions designed to secure the commons" (p. 95) is not apparent until the very last paragraph of the chapter.

The final chapter focuses on Coole's belief that justifying state intervention in procreation requires the existence of ethical and effective methods for doing so. Here she suggests that financial incentives and disincentives to procreate are compatible with liberal governance so long as they are democratically justified. On this point, there is an obvious justice objection that when the cost of procreating is made higher through government disincentives, it is primarily the poor whose personal choices are limited, not the rich. Coole engages briefly with this issue, suggesting that governments could do more to redistribute income to compensate for unintended unfair effects. This response, however, is somewhat unsatisfying as it is unclear as to how the disincentive to procreate would work if accompanied by compensation to lessen the burden. It would have been useful to see more engagement with this objection as well as a more tangible suggestion of how to rectify it.

At a deeper level, given that Coole favors the circumscribed consequentialist approach to population controls, it seems that the empirical question—whether procreation in fact harms others—is essential to know. After all, we cannot weigh individual liberty against

collective interest without a clear picture of exactly what the collective interest is. Yet at the end of the empirically-focused first chapter, she seems agnostic about the answer to this question, preferring to focus on normative questions instead. As a result, we are left with a Millian approach to determining *how* to answer Coole's core question as opposed to the actual answer.

Despite these shortcomings, *Should We Control World Population?* contains much thought provoking material, empirical data, and a good many historical and global examples. Where necessary, Coole does an admirable job of contextualizing and explaining various political theories for the uninitiated and, as a result, the book is highly accessible to nonspecialists and the interested public.

Overall, *Should We Control World Population?* provides a good antidote to the commonly-held assumption that procreation is beyond the legitimate scope of governmental influence. And while it raises more questions than it answers, it should prompt political theorists, policymakers, and philosophers to address these questions more directly.

—ELIZABETH FINNERON-BURNS

Elizabeth Finneron-Burns is a teaching fellow in political theory at the University of Warwick and a researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm.